



6 Discussions and Recommendations

The primary and key finding of this Audit is that accurate information on the range and nature of ECCE services targeting disadvantage is extremely difficult to access. The situation regarding information on services targeting special needs is even more marked. A major contributing factor is that data on targeted services is not generally disaggregated within universal datasets. This discussion elaborates on that finding. It highlights a number of critical issues which have arisen, and makes recommendations on the specific areas addressed herein.

6.1 Targeting

On the evidence of this Audit there is no nationally understood protocol or set of criteria in the context of targeted services for children. Criteria are developed anew for each initiative and relate to eligibility for funding rather than to the children. The criteria, which have been encountered during the processing of the data for this audit, have been varied. The DES have benefited from the input of the ERC, which has, over time, refined the indicators being used to identify disadvantage among the school population. However, these same indicators would not

necessarily be effective in other contexts. Neither are indicators of disadvantage, for example, quite the same thing as criteria for targeted interventions. Indicators can be used to identify disadvantage, but not to determine what should be done about it.

Criteria for targeted interventions should include a rationale for intervention. Also included should be a clear objective in terms of child outcomes. In many interventions to alleviate disadvantage which incorporate services for children, the children themselves are not the focus of the intervention. The criteria should incorporate the principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989) and of the National Children's Strategy (DHC, 2000) in order to ensure that interventions involving children uphold their rights, rather than using children's lives as sites of intervention for the benefit of others.

Recommendation

The CECDE recommends co-operation between the relevant Government Departments to develop a national protocol for targeted interventions, incorporating agreed indicators, criteria, and child-centered quality objectives. This protocol will be suitable for use in all contexts in which targeted interventions with children take place, and will lead to effective co-ordination of initiatives originating in the Government Departments involved.

6.2 Information/Data

The process of information gathering for this Audit demonstrated a broad range of capacity within the sector to deliver information. The principal reason for this would appear to be that the information had not, up to the point at which information gathering for this

project ended, been gathered locally or regionally. However there was growing evidence of initiatives to gather such data, especially by the County Childcare Committees who had, for the most part, been in start up phase up until recently.

Up to this point, the lack of baseline data has been an inhibitor in terms of policy development and co-ordination of services, both at national and regional level. Additionally, such information as has been gathered for various administrative purposes, has reinforced the dichotomy between education and care, reflecting the structural divisions which exist in this regard. There is now, as discussed in the Rationale, an awareness nationally of the importance of relevant, comprehensive data to progress in any area, and of the significance of a carefully considered, widely applicable data strategy to support the collection of such data. Data collection, as modelled in this Audit, can further support efforts to move away from what is now recognised as the artificial divide between care and education.

Recommendation

The CECDE recommends that the relevant Government Departments, in consultation with key stakeholders, develop a national data strategy for the ECCE sector.

The goals of any such strategy must be clearly articulated. The strategy will support a national data collection system, which will provide reliable information on existing provision to facilitate planning, policy development, and the optimal allocation of resources.

The CECDE recommends that the Early Childhood Education Agency develop a national protocol for targeted interventions, incorporating both agreed indicators and criteria. This protocol will be suitable for use in all contexts in which targeted interventions with children take place.

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6.3 Service Provision

Within the category of service provision, three issues are presented for consideration.

6.3.1 Special Needs

Identification of services for children with special needs proved especially difficult. It would appear that there is considerable regional variation in service provision. There is little evidence of coordination of services at either national or regional levels. Neither is there a nationally articulated framework of the relationship, in service provision terms, between the Voluntary Agencies and state provision for children with special needs. An added dynamic in this context is the extra requirement of co-operation across different intervention disciplines. The Education for Persons with Disabilities Bill (DES, 2003b), and the proposed Disabilities Bill, will address some of these coordination issues when enacted.

The CECDE recommends that the relevant Government Departments, in consultation with key stakeholders, develop a national data strategy for the ECCE sector.

Notwithstanding this, negotiating the system is currently difficult and challenging for parents who encounter it for the first time seeking to access services for their children. Both parents and children are dependent on local capacity in terms of service provision. Pressure on services is acute, and it is unlikely that there is further capacity available at service level to engage in the planning and integration that future development will require.

Recommendation

The CECDE recommends a national strategy to afford equity of access to,

- 1 *Information*
- 1 *Identification*
- 1 *Service provision*
- 1 *Ongoing support for all children with special needs.*

Such a strategy will require the co-ordinated efforts of all Government Departments, Health Boards, Voluntary Agencies, parent groups, and the National Council for Special Education.

6.3.2 Provision Targeting Disadvantage for Children aged Birth to Three

The National Childcare Census report (ADM, 2003:34), which presented the national summary findings of a census of childcare services conducted in 1999, stated,

'In general, the distribution of full-day services across urban and rural areas cannot be said to be reflective of their populations Worthy of note then is the fact that relative to their child population, rural areas and so rural parents are under serviced in terms of full day services'. (p.34)

Data gathered in this Audit has revealed that within the context of targeted services, there is also a big discrepancy between the number of full day and sessional services. In addition the distribution of these services is likewise concentrated in urban locations. Sessional services tend to accept children from two and a half to three years of age which, combined with minimal numbers of parent and toddler groups and home visitation schemes, suggests that children aged birth to three are poorly served by targeted interventions. This finding is of concern given the body of research that exists in support of the critical importance of early intervention in the first

three years of life in tackling disadvantage and social exclusion. (Hart and Risley, 1995; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). It is the view of the CECDE that focused attention must be given to deepening our understanding of the role of targeted intervention with children aged birth to three years in Ireland. This will require a multi-layered approach, which incorporates policy, practice and research, as delays in redressing the imbalance in targeted services cannot be afforded.

Recommendation

The CECDE recommends that research be undertaken and disseminated by the Early Childhood Education Agency⁸ on the following issues affecting provision for children in the birth to three age group at risk of disadvantage:

- 1 ***Suitable indicators for identifying disadvantage among this age group.***
- 1 ***Criteria for interventions.***
- 1 ***Models of intervention***

6.3.3 Co-ordination and Continuity

It has been recognised for some time that the ECCE sector in Ireland would benefit from co-ordination and development, hence the CECDE's brief to 'develop and co-ordinate early childhood education in pursuance of the objectives of the White Paper Ready to Learn and to advise the Department of Education and Science (the Department) on policy issues in this area' (Memorandum of Agreement. Item 1).' (CECDE, 2001:2) One aspect of that co-ordination in terms of targeted interventions is continuity of services at key transition points in a child's life:

"At the level of ECEC-systems design coherence and continuity between simultaneous and successive contexts of

development should also be strengthened. This concerns in particular the transitions between home and ECEC-provisions, the transitions between different successive ECEC-provisions, and the transition of ECEC provisions to primary school.

Discrepancies between the most important contexts of development and learning, and early frequent interruptions may render the developmental and learning processes less effective."

(Leseman, 2002:40)

The lack of communication between school-based providers and in particular, community providers means that many children in disadvantaged areas or other situations of disadvantage are making the transition into school from community or other playgroups with no communication between the school and the provider. Given the lessons outlined by Leseman (2002), we can assume that these discontinuities are not conducive to effective interventions. There is evidence, however, that this lack of communication is being addressed in some places.

The DES has been persistent and innovative over the years in seeking to identify and address educational disadvantage. It has also been to the forefront in evaluating those initiatives in a comprehensive and professional way. Large numbers of schools have benefited from additional resources and funding, and, most recently, the DES has sought to identify and support children who have not been targeted previously, those in circumstances of dispersed disadvantage. However, as Map 7 shows, the principle of

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continuity is not always applied. It is particularly important that intervention conditions be continuous, as the experience of Rutland St. has shown (Kellaghan, 1977), to ensure that early gains are not lost on entry to the primary school. ‘... (T) he literature stresses the need to secure gains from early intervention through the provision of Follow Through Intervention through the years of Primary Schooling.’ (McGough, 2001:6)

Recommendation

The CECDE recommends that research be undertaken to identify, evaluate and disseminate effective models supporting co-ordination and continuity of provision for children experiencing disadvantage, and with special needs. Such models must protect and enhance any gains from early intervention.

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6.3.4 Special Needs and Disadvantage

This Audit has dealt with Special Needs and Disadvantage separately to ensure clarity. However it would not be accurate to give the impression that as categories they are mutually exclusive. Reference has been made, for example, to evidence of a higher incidence of Mild General Learning Disability among children experiencing disadvantage. Neither is there any reason that a child with any other type of disability cannot also be experiencing disadvantage. What is of concern is not that such an intersection exists, but how children in such circumstances are served by the system of intervention.

The example of special schools being unable to avail of a HSCL teacher has been cited in

the Profile of Provision. More specific to the issue of early intervention is the example of pre-school provision for children with special needs. A child with a disability who attends a pre-school service operated by, for example, one of the Voluntary Agencies is entitled to certain supports in that setting, including, for example support from an SNA. That child will not move on to the primary school, by and large, until s/he is considered developmentally ready to do so.

If the same child, however, is enrolled in Early Start, s/he is not entitled to an SNA. At the end of a year in ES the child must, without exception, move into Junior Infants whether the parents and teachers are in favour of the move or not. Given that ES targets children in disadvantaged areas, the child with special needs in ES is at a double disadvantage. Service provision is based on the context, and the rules governing that context, rather than on the child’s needs.

Recommendation

The CECDE recommends that flexible inter-departmental and inter-agency structures be developed to meet the needs of those children who experience both disadvantage and special needs.

6.4 Recommendations

In summary therefore:

The CECDE recommends co-operation between the relevant Government Departments to develop a national protocol for targeted interventions, incorporating agreed indicators, criteria, and child-centered quality objectives. This protocol will be suitable for use in all contexts in which targeted interventions with children take place, and will lead to effective co-ordination of initiatives originating in the Government Departments involved.

The CECDE recommends that the relevant Government Departments, in consultation with key stakeholders, develop a national data strategy for the ECCE sector. The goals of any such strategy must be clearly articulated. The strategy will support a national data collection system, which will provide reliable information on existing provision to facilitate planning, policy development, and the optimal allocation of resources.

The CECDE recommends a national strategy to afford equity of access to,

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Such a strategy will require the co-ordinated efforts of all Government Departments, Health Boards, Voluntary Agencies, parent groups, and the National Council for Special Education.

The CECDE recommends that research be undertaken and disseminated by the Early Childhood Education Agency⁸ on the following issues affecting provision for children in the birth to three age group at risk of disadvantage:

- 1 Suitable indicators for identifying disadvantage among this age group.
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The CECDE recommends that research be undertaken to identify, evaluate and disseminate effective models supporting co-ordination and continuity of provision for children experiencing disadvantage, and with special needs. Such models must protect and enhance any gains from early intervention.

The CECDE recommends that flexible inter-departmental and inter-agency structures be developed to meet the needs of those children who experience both disadvantage and special needs.

6.5 Final Conclusion

This project has been fortunate in garnering the co-operation and goodwill of many organisations and individuals engaged in the development and delivery of Early Childhood Care and Education service provision in Ireland. The information gained from this audit of provision of services targeting children at risk from disadvantage and /or with special needs has raised a number of important issues that are central to the future development of the Early Childhood Care and Education sector in Ireland. It has, for the first time, addressed service provision across all settings and has bridged some traditional boundaries such as those between care and education and disadvantage and special needs. On the whole it has generated many more questions than answers. However, this is to be welcomed as an opportunity to reflect on developments, both historical and current that have contributed to the present character of service provision for children aged birth to six. It is hoped that the formulation of such key questions will promote discussion and debate, exchange of information and ideas, and coordination and cooperation amongst all stakeholders. Ultimately this will underpin the development of a coherent framework of early years provision that will support the positive achievements of all the children of Ireland.

⁸ The Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) was established to prepare the groundwork for the Early Childhood Education Agency (CECDE, 2001). The functions of the Early Childhood Education Agency are described in *Ready to Learn, the White Paper on Early Childhood Education (DES, 1999:133)*.

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8 • Appendices

Appendix 1

Information Template.

Name of service

Address:

Telephone/Fax:

Email:

Description of service

e.g. age range of children, duration etc.

Purpose of service *e.g. Child care for parents in training programmes, respite care etc.*

Appendix 2

Audit of Provision Letter

Dear Colleague,

The Minister for Education and Science has appointed Dublin Institute of Technology and St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra to jointly undertake a project to co-ordinate and develop early childhood education and development in Ireland. Under joint management of both colleges, the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education has now been established at St. Patrick's College to progress this initiative.

The Centre will co-ordinate, develop and enhance early education provision for all children from birth to 6 years and will focus on disadvantaged and special needs groups. It will also undertake and/or commission research and development through which best practice in curriculum, teaching methodology and parental involvement may be implemented and evaluated.

We are now beginning an audit of provision of services for children aged birth - 6 years aimed at alleviating disadvantage and/or supporting those with special needs . If you or your organisation is involved in the provision of such services we would appreciate it if you could complete the attached form. (To facilitate record keeping can you please return the form even if it does not apply to you). In addition if you are aware of any other similar initiatives within the early years sector we would appreciate any information or contact details.

Thank you for your cooperation in this regard.

Yours truly

Maresa Duignan, Jacqueline Fallon

Development Officers

CECDE

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Appendix 3

Pen Pictures Interview Schedule.

1 Can you describe the service?

Prompts: location, demographics, economy, infrastructure.

1 Why/How has this service/initiative developed?

Prompts: Trigger issues, supports e.g. funding, advice, premises, lobbying, personalities, politics.

1 What are the aims and objectives of the service/initiative?

Prompts: Impact on child, on families, in community.

1 What future do you see for the service/initiative and how do you plan to achieve this?

Appendix 4

Reminder Letter.

Dear

In November 2002, we wrote to you with regard to an audit of service provision that we are currently engaged in. The aim of the audit is to give a nationwide picture of the availability of services for children at risk of disadvantage and children with special needs. It is our aim to publish the results of this audit by Autumn 2003. It will be made available in book form and also online in a database.

We have begun to collate the information we have already received and we notice that we do not have any entries for your county. We are very anxious to ensure that the services in your county for disadvantaged children or children with special needs are included in this publication. Please send us any information you have gathered on early childhood care and education services in your county in relation to disadvantage or special needs.

If you do not have any information on services that specifically cater for disadvantage or special needs please send us any information on early childhood care and education services. The information we require is as follows:

- Location of service (contact details where possible)
- Age range of children
- Duration (full day care, sessional, etc.)
- Purpose of service.

If you have any questions you would like to ask us with regard to this request please give us a call or email us and we will be happy to get back to you. We have a deadline of February 14th 2003 for this stage of the audit and therefore we would appreciate your earliest response.

Thank you in anticipation
Yours sincerely

Maresa Duignan, Jacqueline Fallon

Development Officers

CECDE

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